

Urban Parks' Role In NP System Eyed

By Jean Matthews

Urban parks as places where human survival values can be imparted to visitors was a clear theme at the June 8-12, 1987 Urban Parks Conference in New York City, called and keynoted by NPS Director William Mott. The more than 130 park superintendents, natural resource managers, interpreters, and members of the Washington office NPS directorate in attendance spent five days of intensive interacting and emerged with recommendations in six areas of urban park endeavor. These recommendations are currently being circulated to the superintendents who attended the conference and will be submitted to the Director by October 1.

Of particular interest to *Park Science* readers is Objective #5, which deals with "a comprehensive communication/marketing program that would enable the park manager and staff to better manage and share information requirements, build a stronger base of constituent support, strengthen both internal and external networks, and generate improved awareness and support of the park and the Service within the community." The recommendations spell out the natural resource reasons for "why we need to communicate park ideals."

Denny Galvin, NPS Deputy Director, called urban parks "places where people collide with their planet and their culture, and as such they are very important places. The imprimatur of excellence goes into **all** NPS sites – not just the great natural parks. When we first came to Gateway, we didn't look for some new urban approach. We said 'Where do we put our nature trails and our interpretive panels?'"

Dr. Jessyna McDonald, a former NPS EE and Recreation Specialist and currently Chairman of Recreation Studies at Purdue University, told the conferees:

"If you can't reach, you can't teach. So the first thing to do is get the urban people to your parks. In the rapidly changing urban picture, value systems are splintering and crashing. The life boats of church and state are disappearing. The National Park Service can function as a support system. Urban parks can operate as extensions of the community, doubling back and affecting the surrounding areas, tending to make whole neighborhoods more parklike, engendering pride and effort."

John Tanacredi, Chief of Professional Services at Gateway NRA, described the Jamaica Bay Refuge within the park boundaries, the greenhouses where natural vegetation is grown for park landscaping, meadow restoration, osprey poles, marsh areas, measures to protect the piping plover (an endangered species), and programs for urban children such as Ecology Village – all opportunities to educate visitors about the ecosystem, its interactions and interdependencies, how their own communities and neighborhoods fit into this scheme, and the values and care involved.

Eugene Hester, NPS Associate Director for Natural Resources, called on urban park personnel to go beyond their own message and mission and function openly as part of the total National Park System. Urban parks, he said, have the responsibility of conveying the important lessons of clean water, clean air, animals, plants, migration, predation, demographics – all the systemic interactions which a U.S. population that was basically rural once understood

"We no longer enjoy this understanding," Hester

said. "We have to let urban people know how water is stored, kept usable, moves through the environment – how air and water serve the wider community, how the ecological health of parks is related to the health of the total environment."

Hester suggested that urban parks should work toward harnessing the energies of their nearby constituents "to help us, as park employees, protect our natural resources." He observed that Director Mott "is strong for biological diversity, for threatened and endangered species," and pinpointed loss of habitat as a prime problem. "Parks are places," he said, "where visitors should be helped to understand the intrinsic value of all animal and plant life – how every organism has some ecological value and many have human benefits yet to be discovered. Parks are opportunities to explain these values – especially urban parks."

The need for social science research, posed by the changing demographics of both visitors and the National Park Service, was recognized by Sociologist William Kornblum of New York University and Don Field, NPS Social Scientist.

George B. Hartzog, Jr., a former NPS Director, challenged the group to consider the problem within NPS ranks. "A burning concern" for the Service itself, he suggested, is to examine its own commitment to the teaching mission. "I perceive," he said, "a lack of consensus within the NPS ranks as to what is our business and should we be in it?"

Dr. Field, who recently completed a survey of NPS personnel with relation to the Service, described the need for sociological research both inside and outside the Service and the imperative to "adjust our traditions to fit the 21st Century if we are to survive into that era."